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Temples and gods in roman Dakhleh, studies in the indigenous cults of an Egyptian oasis

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

1997

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Kaper, O. E. (1997). Temples and gods in roman Dakhleh, studies in the indigenous cults of an Egyptian oasis. s.n.

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provides a welcome new religion.

9: Conclusion

There are three important general conclusions to be drawn from the information presented in the chapters above.

The first is that the relative position of the Dakhleh Oasis versus Kharga can be more clearly defined. The most important sanctuary of the Southern Oasis was undoubtedly the temple of Hibis in Kharga. Even today, its remains are the most impressive of all the temples in the oases. It can now also be concluded that Dakhleh housed the principal temple of Seth, undoubtedly located at Mut el-Kharab, as is clear from the frequent depictions of Seth in the Dakhleh temples (chapters 2 & 3). When the Nile Valley inscriptions refer to the cult of Seth in the Southern Oasis, this is to be taken specifically as a reference to the cult in Dakhleh. Moreover, the cult of Seth remained of paramount importance in the oasis up to the end of the pagan religion, despite attempts to replace the god.

The second conclusion is that the religious concepts current in Dakhleh were formed under influence of the Theban theology. The Hibis temple shows that the transmission of Theban priestly knowledge to the Southern Oasis dates back to the Saite Period at least.¹ The decoration of the temenos gateway at Ein Birbiyeh, shortly before the start of our era, betrays this influence (chapter 1), and the recently reconstructed astronomical ceiling from Deir el-Haggar (chapter 5) shows that Theban theological notions remained important in Dakhleh into the second century CE. Economic contacts between Theban temples and the Western Desert oases can be traced back even as far as the Eighteenth Dynasty.² The reliefs and paintings in the Dakhleh temples provide us with a clear indication of the extent and lasting influence of the Theban westward expansion, even when Thebes had ceased to be a major religious centre itself. The Theban ideas formed the basis of the temple decoration in the Dakhleh Oasis, but its influence extended into other areas as well. R. Bianchi has recently pointed at the similarities in the material remains from funerary contexts in Thebes and the Southern Oasis.³

One of the remarkable aspects of the Dakhleh temple decoration is its cohesion. The same gods are depicted on the temple walls in different parts of the oasis. These gods betray an emphasis on the local cults in the reliefs, the reason for which I suggested in chapter 2 to be a joined festival in the oasis in which all its deities participated. The possibility of such a joined festival became less remote after examining the scenes of the priests of Kellis in chapter 4 and the scenes of the palm rib offering in chapter 7. Both chapters concluded with an independent dating of the rituals involved to the date of 1 Tybi. At Deir el-Haggar, the visitor's dipinti upon the temenos wall confirm the celebration of a public festival on this day. These scarce indications suggest a celebration in Dakhleh on 1 Tybi which involved several of the local temples, which included those of Deir el-Haggar and Ismant el-Kharab. The occasion may have been associated with the coronation of a god, as is suggested by the use of palm ribs and the presence of the goddesses of the New Year. It is interesting in this connection that the calendar of the papyrus Sallier IV,⁴ associates the date of 1 Tybi with the 'gods of the foreign lands'. Is it possible, that this New Kingdom text refers to a precursor of the same festival in Dakhleh in earlier times? Speculation on the nature of the festival will doubtless continue as new material emerges from the ongoing excavations in the oasis.

¹ The earliest decoration preserved in the Hibis temple dates to the Saite Period, see Cruz-Uribe, in: *Varia Aegyptiaca* 3 (1987), 215-30.

² Giddy, *Egyptian Oases*, 71-74, 154-55 Table VII.

³ R.S. Bianchi, 'From Dusk to Dawn: The American Discovery of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt', in: *The American Discovery of Ancient Egypt, Essays* (Los Angeles, 1996), ed. by N. Thomas, 132-33.

⁴ XII, 9-10, as possibly also to be emended in the Cairo calendar; Leitz, *Tagewählerei*, 193-95.